

An Epiphanic Imagination

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Last week, Kory mentioned that the Gospel of Mark is like an action-adventure story. Jesus jumps out of the gate like a thoroughbred and doesn't show any signs of slowing. The frenetic, fast pace of Mark's gospel is important to keep in mind. Jesus has been moving immediately from task to task; from healing to teaching to preaching. Then we get this famous moment, this famous transfiguration of Jesus the Christ.

Mark 9: 2 – 9 Page _____ in your pew bibles.

I'm not sure if you noticed, but there has been a common feature over the last few weeks in the sermons. Can you guess what that might be? Now, if you're like the children when I ask them questions during the children's moment, then your first response might be, "I don't know what the answer is, but I bet it has something to do with Jesus."

Fair. Kory's sermons have had "something to do with Jesus." But he's also been continually referencing movies. We've explored Jesus in terms of the movie *Anchorman*, "I'm kind of a big deal, people know me..." and as Elliot Ness from *The Untouchables*. We've thought through faith in terms of the movie *Signs*. And I'm sure the movie references will continue; in fact, if I was a betting man I might even put money on it. Okay, I'll admit, *I am* a betting man and I've already got 10 bucks on the line; Kory don't let me down.

But in case the plethora of movie references didn't clue you in, let me clarify: Kory likes movies. He loves to watch them and talk about them. He gets excited about them. And, he used to be a movie critic, too. So when Kory discovered that I had never seen the movie *Dead Poets Society*, he took it upon himself to mend this cosmic injustice. And, to be honest, I'm glad he did. Not only is it a great movie, but it has a fascinating scene which will allow me to keep up the pattern Kory has already established.

So travel with me to a classroom, taught by an instructor, Mr. Keating, played by Robin Williams. He is the new teacher at the nation's most reputable prep-school where he will teach a class of young men about poetry and language; and arguably, he will teach them about life itself. At a school where calculation and precision, discipline, tradition, and control are the highest virtues, Mr. Keating opens up a world of emotion, creativity, and self-discovery. He's rather unorthodox in his teaching style, and at one point in the movie, he jumps up on his desk and asks his students why he would do this.

The students mostly stare at him and one voice from the back of the room answers, "To feel taller."

"No," he says:

"I stand upon my desk to remind myself that we must constantly look at things in a different way... Just when you think you know something," he explains, "you must look at it in a different way."

And so he has every one of his students come forward, step up on his desk, and view the classroom anew, from a different angle, to discover a new vision, to see the world with a fresh perspective. And, I think, to see something that otherwise they might have missed.

In a way, that is what has happened in our text this morning. The world has been opened up for three disciples—Peter, James, and John. These three men follow Jesus up a high mountain and watch as the clothes of Jesus turn radiant, the world is bathed in the light of Christ, and there with him appears Moses and Elijah. They have ascended to a high place, a desk above desks, to see Jesus from a different perspective. And there, at the climax of this terrifying event, a cloud moves in and a thundering voice announces, “**This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!**”

What these men witnessed in our gospel account was a transfiguration, or, more simply, a change in Jesus. Now while I think it is pretty easy to see from our story that Jesus changed for these men, it seems something else happened. They didn’t just see any kind of change, but a special change. They experienced, what we might call, an “epiphany.” But what is an epiphany? How is a transfiguration also an epiphany? While transfiguration means a change in the figure of someone or something, an epiphany is a manifestation. Epiphany comes from two Greek words, *epi* and *phanein*. The prefix *epi* means something like “on or to” and the verb *phanein* means “to show.” So, an epiphany is a “showing to,” or, as I like to say, a “showing forth.” Jesus not only changed, but in that change, showed something forth.

Peter, James and John did not witness a mundane or ordinary change in Jesus, they witnessed the divine Christ character of Jesus in this change. Jesus showed forth the Christ to them. God’s voice, echoing Jesus’ baptism, pronounced the deepest dimension of Jesus’ identity. Here was the Son of God, standing before these trembling and terrified three disciples... then, in a moment, it was over.

One writer describes the event like this, “Now, on a mountaintop, time evaporates like mist before the dawning of a great glory. If the pace of the journey [in Mark’s gospel] has left us panting, now the height is too great for us to catch our breath.”¹

I think that is true: *We* are panting, *we* are left trying to catch *our* breath. In a way, it’s not just Peter, James and John who witness a transfiguration, who experience an epiphany, we too are there with them. And like the disciples we have come to this moment, here in this sanctuary from our own frenetic, fast paced lives. We’ve been scurrying between jobs, families, schools, and obligations. And we have come to a sanctuary as yet another stop along the busy roadway of life’s journeys; but here, in this place, we can hear a story and experience the Christ shown forth to us. Out of the flow of life’s demands we have ascended with Peter, James and John to a high place, we have stepped upon that desk above desks to see the deepest dimension of reality shown forth in Jesus as the Christ. If we listen carefully we can hear God’s voice announce to us that this is God’s Son, the one whom God loves.

¹ Willson, Patrick J. “Time out of Time.” *Christian Century*, January 24 (1996). See online at: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_n3_v111/ai_14794428

And yet, we might ask, what makes this so different? Hasn't Jesus, in all that Jesus is, been present with the disciples from the beginning? Why a mountaintop transfiguration for the disciples? And, what is more, don't *we* already know that Jesus is the Christ, too, the Son of the living God? What need do we have for "epiphany"?

I want to suggest this morning that what was transformed in the moment of transfiguration and epiphany is not just Jesus as the Christ, but the disciples themselves. Their perception of Jesus was shattered in the brilliant light that overtook them and they were swallowed up in the cloud of God's voice. The disciples witnessed the vibrancy of Jesus' Christhood emanating before them... and they were terrified... speechless. Value, meaning, and reality itself broke into their world in a way they had not yet seen nor could not quite grasp, and, as we discover through the rest of Mark's gospel, struggled to understand.

What happens in this story, for us, might be our own transformation; our own ability to rise above the throes of life and see God's Love pouring into the world through Jesus as the Christ. It takes a special capacity to carry the abundance of that reality with us, and within us... it takes a way of seeing things that unlocks life's deepest dimensions. But I think we do have a capacity for this, and so I invite you to consider with me *the imagination*. We have inside us, I believe, an often neglected imagination that can be defined by epiphany; and, I think, this is precisely what story of the transfiguration can unlock for us, our *epiphanic imagination*. This is an imagination that shows forth the world in its deepest dimensions, it sees Jesus as the Christ and the Grace of God saturating the world around us. It is a way of seeing that is easy to forget. And so, like Mr. Keating in "Dead Poet's Society," we might want to remind ourselves to see in a different way, to activate our epiphanic imagination.

Mr. Keating demonstrates this most profoundly for us in a pivotal scene. As the students open up their school-required textbook on poetry to read the introduction, Mr. Keating has the students rip out a whole essay from their books on poetry... the analysis of poetry in that essay is cold and calculating; it attempts to "mathematize" the poem, chart its axes and discover its formula to predict its value... basically, reading poetry is, for that essayist, a distanced cerebral exercise. It's all about detached reflection and not about intimate, engaged, participation with the poem—it makes the poem impotent. It loses a kind of depth. Mr. Keating wants this mundane and shallow perspective eliminated so that something else can show itself.

At the youth lock-in over this past weekend we had the opportunity to play a game called "Survivor Island." The game was set up in such a way that everyone had a particular identity with a background, personality traits, and some secrets. Six of the thirteen participants would survive, the rest would perish, and the youth had to decide how to divide up. The exercise was a way of thinking through how we understand human beings and what we value when confronted by the reality of death. As they reflected on the game, the youth debated whether people would have been only interested in their own survival or whether it was possible to have sacrificed for others. A debate sprang up over how we understand human beings, or, what we might call "human nature."

It is a question we might ask ourselves as well, one that might pertain to the epiphanic imagination. How do we understand "human nature"? I think there are a lot of stories out there that try to define for us "what the human is." We hear stories, really popular ones, about human beings as political animals or economic creatures. We are supposed to be people who buy things

and consume, or who grapple after power. We are supposed to be biologically self-interested after survival and be socially concerned for our own wants and desires, calculating and mathematizing life to make the most rational choices and the most efficient decisions. What's in it for me, we're supposed to ask, and how can I get the most out of it. I think it is amazing how we often become the very stories we tell ourselves.

That is precisely why I believe the story of the transfiguration and the gospel itself is so important. It is a different story, one that can cultivate for us an epiphanic imagination. There was something more to Jesus than healing, and teaching, and preaching. There was something that needed a mountain top to unveil, and later a cross to make complete. That reality lit up the mountain in the moment of transfiguration, and it can light up our world today. What was shown forth comes to define how we see the world, what the world itself means. I want to suggest that an epiphanic imagination *sees as God does*. In that moment on the mountain top the disciples witness how God saw Jesus Christ, as the beloved one. The disciples' own way of looking at Jesus did not match up with how God saw Jesus. And so their view was exploded by the overpowering Grace of God's view on things. "Jesus is not what you think he is," that voice seemed to say, "he is so much more, he is the Christ, he is my Son, the one whom I love."

The epiphanic imagination is the capacity to glimpse-forward from the now and witness the depths of reality itself—to see how God sees the world: with boundless Love. When we activate our *epiphanic imagination* we understand life with a value and meaning that often hides behind our other ways of seeing the world—economically, socially, politically, biologically, psychologically. To be honest, I don't live in the world of my epiphanic imagination very often. Those other stories about human existence often define how I understand myself and others. But, I believe, while helpful at times, those stories can miss a dimension of life, one that is opened up by an epiphanic imagination, by seeing the world the way God sees it. Those other stories, when they are absolutized and taken to be the final story on human existence miss something true, real, and important.

Our epiphanic imaginations make present Jesus the Christ as the Son of God, and, in that way, our epiphanic imaginations also show forth God's Love, a Love that is in and for this world... From that desk above desks, with our epiphanic imagination, life looks more like God's poetry than human calculation... and the heart of that poetry beats with a story God asks us to *tell ourselves and each other*: "You are my beloved."

Amen.